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DEPARTMENT FOR EUR/AGS

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SUBJECT: Kurt Beck: Profile of a Pragmatic Social Democrat

REF: a) 06 Frankfurt 2605, b) 06 Frankfurt 2124

Sensitive but unclassified; not for internet distribution.

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY. Social Democratic/SPD national chairman and Rheinland-Pfalz Minister-President Kurt Beck rose to power as a centrist leader combining political bridge-building with charm appeal to a working-class and often rural base. Having achieved prominence via hard work and charisma rather than family heritage, education, or ideology, his motto appears to be "only success succeeds" (embracing whatever position is likely to carry the day). As leader of a fractured party and head of Germany's only SPD-majority state, however, Beck seems aware that he has few effective allies as a potential national leader. END SUMMARY.

Beck's Coming of Age: True Blue  
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¶2. (SBU) Beck has bonafide working-class roots that should feed his "man of the people" appeal to tabloid-reading Germans. The son of a brick-mason, Beck dropped out of school to apprentice as an electrician (at a German Army radio-repair facility), later earning a high-school diploma through night classes. Beck's wife Roswitha, a hairdresser, is known for keeping her salon job even after two decades of public life.

¶3. (SBU) His regional roots run deep as well. Beck and family still live in the small town (Steinfeld) where he grew up and served as mayor. Beck likes to say he wastes no time in Berlin after meetings there, grabbing the first flight home. Until 2006, Beck had consistently waved off any notion of national ambitions and still keeps monthly office hours where he talks one-on-one with constituents. He makes a point of attending the state's many wine festivals, where he connects well with locals.

¶4. (SBU) Beck rose in the local SPD in part through the union movement and later by embodying a centrist alternative to the conservative void left by Helmut Kohl's move to national politics (Kohl also hails from Rheinland-Pfalz). Rather than storming to power on an ideological wave, Beck worked systematically in his structurally conservative state to charm colleagues and prove his ability to build coalitions and enact policies. Beck's third state election victory in March 2006 (ref B) -- giving the state SPD an absolute majority despite a national defeat six months earlier -- clinched Beck's title as reigning SPD heavyweight and paved the way for him to become the party's national chairman (a position he was reportedly offered in 2005, but declined in order to focus on state elections).

Political Foundations  
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¶5. (SBU) Beck was identified in the early '90s with the "Third Way" movement in the SPD, which sought to modernize the party's message and used centrist appeals to business and to socially-conservative

lower-income voters as the means to put social democrats back in power (former Chancellor Schroeder also made this a hallmark). Defeating the CDU in Kohl's home state in 1994 (four years before Schroeder came to power nationally), Beck largely stuck to his centrist pledges -- in part through a successful twelve-year coalition with the liberal/pro-market Free Democrats. His economic record of limited but active government (again, a "Third Way" characteristic) featured lower unemployment and higher growth than many other German states, many of Germany's first all-day schools (key to promoting women's workforce participation and boosting the birthrate), and successful adjustment to the closure of dozens of U.S. military installations (and the loss of an estimated 100,000 jobs). At home, he enjoys remarkably broad approval among supporters of the opposition CDU.

16. (SBU) Germany's longest-serving state leader, Beck gained respect nationally and across party aisles as a strong negotiator and consensus-builder on issues in the Bundesrat (Germany's upper house). His national policy successes included expanding dual citizenship for foreigners born in Germany (1999) and the 2000 tax reform.

17. (SBU) Beck in Rheinland-Pfalz is seen as a centrist, workaholic, and patient problem-solver. He downplays his personal ambition, cultivating an image as a selfless public servant. Long-time opponents say they find it hard to attack him, since he is not a polarizing figure in state politics and does not flaunt his ambition, yet has won a stature that puts him above the fray at least in his own state and party. Beck is also a highly competent debater on topics where he has strong knowledge; he can disarm an opponent while appealing to the viewer at large. When dealing with staff, however, he can reportedly be short-fused and demanding.

18. (SBU) Beck has had limited and mixed experience on foreign

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affairs. His government is a steadfast supporter of the extensive U.S. forces located in the state, offering in-kind support wherever possible. Those bases (and their economic contribution), along with the 2005 presidential visit to state capital Mainz, served as reminders of the importance of good transatlantic ties -- however, Beck often delegated the handling of those ties (to Deputy Minister-President/MinInt Karl Peter Bruch). Beck professes affinity for America, particularly for partner state South Carolina.

But he does not speak English and does not seem to look to the U.S. as an economic, social, or political model.

Can He Appeal to a National Audience?

19. (SBU) Beck's greatest apparent stumbling block in his fourteen months as SPD national chairman (and presumptive future candidate for chancellor) is his limited appeal to or ability to connect with Germans across the country where the "hometown" factor is absent -- documented in a series of dismal polls. The period also coincides with strong showings by globe-trotting Chancellor Merkel and Foreign Minister Steinmeier (SPD) -- in a country that "loves its foreign ministers" (in the words of a regional SPD politician). If Beck's national polling remains weak in the longer term, his presumptive candidacy for chancellor in 2009 could fade, but he will remain unchallenged in Rheinland-Pfalz until 2011. Beck's wife reportedly does not want to move to Berlin, which (if true) could be a barrier to Beck's political ambition

10. (SBU) Since Beck is not a polarizing figure, opponents find him more vulnerable on his lack of experience rather than on his ideology. Beck's relative inexperience on foreign affairs also has led him into several gaffes over the past year, for instance his suggestion that "moderate" Taliban should be part of a dialogue on reconciliation in Afghanistan. Like many other German political leaders, he is more strident when wearing his "party hat" (i.e. on the national stage or when speaking to the party faithful) -- than he is as Minister-President or behind closed doors. Beck's public opposition to U.S. missile defense plans in Poland and the Czech Republic may be intended to stem the desertion of the SPD left wing to the new Left Party and to distinguish the SPD from the CDU in the

lead-up to Bundestag elections (2009 at the latest).

¶11. (SBU) Despite his present poor standing, Beck remains a force. He is a successful manager -- with a detail-oriented but apparently less authoritarian style than Schroeder -- who as party chairman is seeking to promote other leadership figures (for example by thinning the ranks of deputy chairpersons while enhancing their status). However, the SPD is in serious trouble at present, faced by declining membership and increasing competition from the Left Party. Beck remains undeniably likable behind closed doors and on camera, but he has not thus far shown the skills needed to transform the SPD by moving it clearly toward the center to win votes from the CDU/CSU or to the left, to restore its appeal to a disillusioned left-wing.

COMMENT: Patience May Not Have Its Virtues  
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¶12. (SBU) Some say that Beck (like Chancellor Merkel during her period as opposition leader) continues to enjoy the advantage of being underestimated by those, largely from outside his home region, who see him as too tied to a rural state or not savvy enough to lead the SPD (and Germany) effectively. Others say that Beck is more ambitious than he appears, and could make deeper changes to improve the SPD's (and his own) poll figures. So far, though, Beck has shown himself a steady hand rather than a turnaround artist.

¶13. (SBU) Faced with the SPD's decline and a popular chancellor, Beck's reliance on patient bridge-building must bear more fruit over the coming year than the past year, or he will come under intense fire from within the party's ranks. If that happens, Beck always has a return ticket to Mainz.

¶14. This cable was coordinated with Embassy Berlin.

POWELL